DANICA MAIER

Grafting Propriety

FROM STITCH TO THE DRAWN LINE

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F***ing Homework: Danica Maier's Art of Domestic Subversion

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This essay begins with a conclusion: Danica Maier's work is both unsettling and provocative. It unsettles some of what we have come to think about the histories of women's domestic sewing, and it provokes new understandings of the domestic and the decorative as sites for women's self-assertion. This essay does not describe Maier's work in substantial detail, nor is it intended to explain the work, for the artist wants you to embark on your own process of discovery, to look closely, to draw your own conclusions. Instead, this text provides some insight into the complex histories that can inform a deeper understanding of the work: the gendered histories of women's needlework that serve as material for artistic production; the domestic as a space for discursive formation; and the politics of homework, especially when it is gendered and classed, undervalued and unpaid. This text is written to *support* the art work, in keeping with performance scholar Shannon Jackson's notion of support: that which sustains the work and brings it into the realm of the socially engaged; that which connects it to other artworks, audiences, spaces of viewership, institutions, history, discourse, politics, and everyday life.[1]

The body of Maier's work presented here in *Grafting Propriety* takes the form of drawing, yet is closely aligned with textiles and with sewing in particular. Maier responds to the loaded, coded histories of the domestic crafts—objects that women made, collected, decorated, and used in the home: samplers sewn in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and America; an ornately hand-embroidered crewel Jacobean bedspread; 'willow ware' dinner plate patterns; and floral fabrics by the iconic British designer Laura Ashley. Maier uses the drawn line to reinterpret traditional, decorative motifs and patterns, isolating and emphasising specific details, reconfiguring and rearranging overall patterns, and playing with design, composition, scale and site. Pattern is contingent on the notion of repetition; through drawing, Maier enacts a type of repetition that is interpretive rather than mimetic, harnessing the repetitive act of mark making to produce new patterns or 'repeats'. Maier transforms stitched surfaces into hand-drawn lines, expanding miniature stitches into monumental works, and interrogating ideas of what stitch is and the spaces it may rightfully occupy. The work is playful, provocative, and polysemic, drawing us in to reveal unexpected imagery and meanings, and by extension, proposing new possibilities for thinking about needlework, the domestic, and the decorative. In so doing, the artist joins other contemporary artists like Anne Wilson, Karen Reimer, Ghada Amer, and Reza Farkhondeh, who use drawn and stitched lines to unpick stereotypes about domestic labour and women's pleasure.

SEWING SELVES

Both literally, as when the artist exhibits large and small-scale drawings in tandem with historical textiles, and more metaphorically, as when she uses them as a point of departure, Danica Maier's work engages the complicated histories of

women's material culture. Simultaneously embracing and subverting needlework, she creates physical and discursive spaces for thinking about the authorial aspects of sewing, and by extension, women's rhetorical agency.

Feminist scholars, most notably Roszika Parker and Jennifer Harris, have analysed the role of sewing as a normative force associated with the inculcation of Western ideals of femininity.[2] Men and women alike practiced needlework until the seventeenth century, when men's needlework was professionalised, and women's domesticated.[3] Sewing became more closely associated with femininity during the Victorian era, with its ideals of rigid gender roles and a renewed insistence that women work inside the home. There is nothing inherently feminine about craft or needlework: as Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock remind us, the feminine is the product of a patriarchal culture that constructs male dominance by enforcing specific differences between the sexes. They further note that ideal feminine traits such as piety, chastity, submissiveness, delicateness and the decorative are not natural characteristics, but rather, ideological and socially imposed.[4]

Sewing came to be considered women's work at a time when larger shifts were taking place in the economy—with industrialisation and the rise of the capitalist marketplace—and in the realm of art—with an increased focus on the individual maker—and women came to be excluded from both. As Maureen Daly Goggin asserts, "within the world of the needle as elsewhere, men were understood to create, women to mend and tidy up".[5] Indeed, Pollock and Parker trace a history of women's exclusion from the world of art and their relegation to the sphere of domestic craft, while Clive Edwards notes that by the mid-eighteenth century, women's creativity was directed at the home.[6]

With the rise in industrial production of cloth came a corollary decline in the amount and types of textile work performed by women in the home; sewing came to be viewed as an appropriate leisure activity for middle class women, and would provide respectable employment skills to women of few or modest means.[7] Sewing skills, practiced and evidenced in samplers, were varyingly indicative of femininity and gentility, good upbringing, family status, marriage potential, domestic ability, and employability. While fulfilling socially proscribed norms, needlework also enabled women to "intentionally make some sort of personal statement with their work", for example, through individual interpretations of pattern and design, choice of colours and fabrics, and the incorporation of text. At a time when women had very little if any access to public sites of discourse, needlework provided a space in which women might speak and be heard.[8]

THE NEEDLE AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DEVICE

Feminist scholars such as Victoria Mitchell, Janis Jefferies and Elaine Showalter have explored the etymological, semiotic and material intersections between text and textiles. Both terms can be traced back to the Latin texere, to weave, an etymology that can also be linked to Greek and Sanskrit associations with making and forming.[9] As Mitchell importantly asserts, "language and textile formation share pliability as well as an inherent capacity to form structural relations between components".[10] Notably, the strategies of piecing and patching associated with quilting find echoes in "the techniques of literary piecing" found in women's writing.[11] Other scholars highlight connections between quilting and narrative structures: artists Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer note that the quilt is a record of women's lives, while scholar bell hooks describes African American quilting traditions as a type of storytelling.[12] Needlework was used to mark household items like linens, tablecloths and napkins, but also, as a semiotic tool to mark and record women's lives and lived experiences.

The domestic has long been a site for women's subjugation and silencing, sometimes by way of repetitive labour, and sometimes by way of cruelty and violence, and the traditional sampler bears witness to both. Text was a common feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century samplers, which were often signed by the maker, at times recording important events in her own life and words.[13] A most compelling example is a sampler created by Elizabeth Parker at the age of 17, circa 1830. Parker's minutely cross-stitched life story, told in 46 lines of tiny red cross-stitches, reveals her suffering at the hands of her employer, who abused her physically, sexually and emotionally. At a time when women were expected to be chaste and pure, submissive and silent, sewing was the only avenue available for Parker to tell her story, and her sampler is part autobiography, part confession, and part testimony.[14]

Very few samplers survived, and today little is known about their makers.[15] Indeed, this is true of samplers studied by Maier during her seven-month research residency in the textile archives of the Usher Gallery at the Collection Museum, Lincoln. Archival records describe the contents of the samplers, providing cursory information about colours, fabrics, threads, motifs and stitches—yet provide few details about the young women and girls who made them—only their names, and only when they were stitched into the samplers. Most historical samplers and textiles remain in archival storage and are rarely seen by members of the general public. By incorporating them into her works, Maier brings new visibility to these objects and those who made them. She provides us with a rare opportunity to view the artefacts, while putting them into dialogue with contemporary forms of mark making, and by extension, contemporary modes of spectatorship. In bringing these

domestic artefacts into public view, Maier also questions distinctions between the hidden and the visible, public and private.

PATTERN, REPETITION, DOMESTICATION

Physical and psychological comfort was essential to Victorian ideals of domesticity, and housewives were expected to embellish their domestic spaces.[16] Like sewing, the work of improving the home was meant to occupy a woman's spare time.[17] The home was a symbol of familial order, and a clean home was essential. Decoration and cleanliness both required endless repetitive labour, and cleaning was a form of patterning:

> The Victorian housewife's obsessive and perfectionist actions of cleaning, washing, ironing, baking, sorting, disposing, gardening, storing, sewing, crocheting, lacing, embroidering, knitting, tatting... all required a good deal of persistence and patience, and they were all to be performed repetitively but delicately.[18]

For Clive Edwards, because crafting and collecting enabled women to personalise their homes, they also provided a sense of agency over the home, representing a type of space-making but also, self-making.[19] While the home has often been a site of women's oppression and segregation, it has at also been a place for women's self-assertion. Similarly, needlework has also operated as a contradictory means of both women's subjugation and emancipation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, feminist artists like Su Richardson, Faith Ringgold, and Miriam Schapiro turned to needlework and craft as part of efforts to eradicate gender oppression, recognise women's unpaid labour in the home, and politicise divisions between public and private spaces. Artists used textiles exactly because of their historical associations with women's domestic craft and women's domestic work—often including the very quilts, diapers and laundry associated with women's unpaid and unrecognised labour in their art works. As Janis Jefferies asserts, "The decorative, craft and the domestic became challenging ideas that women in the fine arts could engage through work involving textiles".[20] During the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the Pattern and Decoration movement used cloth, pattern, and the decorative to subvert gender hierarchies and eradicate distinctions between art and craft, Western and non-Western art, public and private spaces, and art and everyday life.[21] Its artists were also deeply concerned with spectatorship and maintaining the attention of the viewer, turning to pattern and the decorative as a "very different mode of looking and visual attentiveness... a leisurely and less focused scanning for detail that our own culture denigrates and genders".[22]

WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT NECESSARILY WHAT YOU GET

Stepping into an installation or standing in front of works by Danica Maier, the viewer is surrounded and confronted by patterns—of flowers, birds, animals, foliage and ornamental borders—patterns that have come to be associated with the decorative and the domestic, patterns that are often used in the home in wallpaper, upholstery, bedspreads, dinnerware and curtains. Step a bit closer, and one will see that the patterns are comprised of lines, lines that appear to be sewn and stitched. Closer even, and one may notice that the lines are not stitched but drawn, and that the lines are not lines, but letters. This type of attentiveness will pay off for those who choose to truly look and see, as letters form words—words associated with slang, and sex, and pleasure, and privates.

Writing in 1975, the critic Amy Goldin noted that pattern is not so much about the repetition of motif, but about the "constancy and space between the motifs".[23] The empty spaces between composite parts that comprise the overall pattern are just as important for the creation of motif and meaning as the pattern itself. Our work as viewers is to complete the pattern—to fill in the spaces provided by the artist, to insert our own readings and understandings into Maier's work.

Danica Maier's works unpick the very notion of the ideal home and the ideal homemaker; as the artist astutely observes, such ideals are illusory and impossible to achieve[24]. As such, the works propose new patterns of domestic life. Ever aware of the gendered histories of sewing and needlework, Maier's work fits comfortably within Roszika Parker's notion of the subversive stitch.[25] But what happens when the subversive stitch is not a stitch but a drawn line? Maier plays with our expectations—of sewing, drawing, site, material, and meaning. Through the repetitive act of drawing, she invokes needlework strategies of piecing, piercing, unpicking and assembling, in an effort to play with other types of making and unmaking, namely, that of personal and collective identity and modes of being, reminding us that sometimes things are not as we expect them to be. Maier's work involves a certain "defamiliarization of the familiar"—as such it is both unsettling and provocative.[26] Maier unsettles gender expectations and the hierarchies and binaries that have served to delineate spaces, subjectivities, and modes of production: private/public; visible/invisible; sewing/drawing; proper/improper. In so doing, Maier creates playful spaces for subversion and the insertion of subversive personal narratives. She opens up spaces for self-assertion and agency, and she explores the domestic as a site for women's sexual assertion and women's sexual pleasure. In confronting the viewer with such obvious pleasure, she provokes us to reflect on what we see, and by extension perhaps, how we see ourselves.

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